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John Logan: A Retrospective

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John Logan and Family.



Photo © 1981 Peter Logan

JOHN LOGAN: A RETROSPECTIVE

Only the Dreamer Can Change the Dream: Selected Poems, Ecco Press, New York, 1981, \$14.95.

The Bridge of Change: Poems 1974-1980, BOA Editions, Brockport, N.Y., 1981, \$4.50.

With the publication of *Only the Dreamer Can Change the Dream* and *The Bridge of Change*, we have once more in print a substantial body of work by one of this country's most valuable poets. John Logan's opus of nine books thus far, including the *Selected Poems*, represents a formidable and sustaining accomplishment. *Only the Dreamer Can Change the Dream* pulls together the most significant poetry from Logan's previous major collections: *Cycle for Mother Cabrini* (1955), *Ghosts of the Heart* (1960), *Spring of the Thief* (1963), *The Zigzag Walk* (1969), and *The Anonymous Lover* (1973). *The Bridge of Change* contains new poems and also the long poem, "Poem In Progress," previously available as a chapbook.

Among contemporary poets Logan's path has been singular. His work, musically compelling as Yeats, Frost, or Thomas, has found its own form in syllabic verse. Logan's ear is profound. He has been the contemporary to work most successfully in sound. At the height of his powers, his music is symphonic:

Peering, stung
bleared, hung-
over and lame,
through waves of spray
I feel somewhat
panicky,
weird, about my sweat-
ing body
For where do we and our vapors end?
Where does the bath begin?

Strange to be able to see through the steam
(but satisfying to the point of calm,
like the vision of the perfect, new born)
for the first time
the whole.

beautiful body of a friend.
(Poem: Tears, Spray, and Steam — part 1)

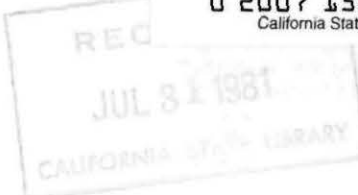
In a recent conversation, Logan told me that when he started out in poetry his background was in biology and physics, not literature. He did not become interested in writing until he translated Rilke in connection with work on a Ph.D. in Philosophy, which he did not complete, at Georgetown University. Working on Rilke changed his life. Besides being interested in the sound of Rilke's poems in German—their internal and external rhyming and their metrics—Logan loved the disturbing imagery and the way Rilke "saved his thunder for the end of the poem." Two poems included in those selected from *Spring of the Thief*, "Song On the Dread of a Chill Spring" and "Lament in Spring," Logan directly attributes to Rilke's influence. He also published "Homage to Rilke," mostly an assemblage of translations, in *The Zigzag Walk*.

Logan learned to write poetry using an iambic pentameter line largely because of translating Rilke; his first major poem, "Cycle for Mother Cabrini," was revised from iambic pentameter to a three-stress line before it was published in *Poetry* in 1953. He continued to write in the three-stress line through *Ghosts of the Heart*, and did not work in anything resembling free-verse until the last poem of that book, "A Trip to Four or Five Towns," which he dedicated to James Wright. That poem, one of his most significant and also one of his personal favorites, marks the beginning of his mature work:

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This bellychilling, shoe soaking, factory-
dug-up-hill smothering Pittsburgh weather!
I wait for a cab in the smart mahogany
lobby of the seminary.
The marble *Pieta* is flanked around
with fake fern. She cherishes her dead son
stretched along her womb he triple crossed.
A small, slippered priest
pads up. Whom do you seek, my son?
Father, I've come in out of the rain.
I seek refuge from the elemental tears,
for my heavy, earthen body runs to grief
and I am apt to drown
in this small and underhanded rain
that drops its dross so delicately
on the hairs of the flowers...

Though in "free-verse," the poem is resoundingly musical. Having studied piano and having always been interested in classical music, it was natural for Logan to become engaged in the music of his poems. Although he had read Frost and Yeats, he told me he did not feel particularly influenced by them. Rather, he discovered his musical effects pretty much on his own.

Besides the musical effects which decorate the ends of the lines, Logan's earlier poems are striking for their mythic narratives. Often he found himself writing about artists who were having trouble with their mothers. In "On the Death of the Poet's Mother Thirty-three Years Later," included in *Ghosts of the Heart*, for the first time he faces his own adult experience in a poem: "My mother died because / I lived or so / I always chose to believe." This theme will haunt his later work.

In *Spring of the Thief*, Logan abandoned the accentual verse he had been using, derived from Gerard Manly Hopkins, and instead began to work with syllabics, trying to break away from iambic rhythms, he invented a thirteen syllable line for "Monologues for the Son of Saul" and "To a Young Poet Who Fleed," and a nine syllable line for "On Reading Camus in Early March." Syllabics have become for him a minimum discipline which enables him to discover where the line may go and gives him a principle of revision; the eight and thirteen syllable lines he uses in *The Bridge of Change* originated in these earlier poems.

It was in the early sixties that Logan met the photographer, Aaron Siskind, with whom he started *Choice* magazine, which was responsible for introducing into print the work of a great number of younger poets; Marvin Bell, Roger Alpon, Dennis Schmitz, Bill Knott, Naomi Lazzard, and Jon Anderson among them. The magazine was also one of the first to introduce the idea of combining poetry and photography. Logan's interest in photography yielded the many intensely visualized poems based on the photographs by Siskind. The Siskind photograph on the cover of the *Selected Poems* not only appeared on the cover of the first issue of *Choice*, but was the subject of Logan's first Siskind inspired poem:

Glove of Aaron Siskind! I
feel your canvas touch
flicked with lead spots of paint
upon the cold point of my heart.
This picture is a fist.
I feel it is a thing
Siskind had cut out of my quivering chest—
out of my huge, furred stomach.
It is a fist. It is a face
in the mirror I no longer watch;
and its light flecks have not the glint of tears
I have never wept
out of the tender, bald knuckles of my eyes.

(On a Photograph by Aaron Siskind — part 4)

A practicing Catholic when he wrote *Spring of the Thief*, Logan shortly thereafter broke away from the Church, and breaking away he began to think of poetry itself as religious in character, a notion he said he learned from Dylan Thomas; the resurrection it promises, the bringing back to life the lost parts of yourself, your childhood and your memories, and leaving you with a "momentary peace," a kind of freedom from anxiety where your problems are worked out in the poem—"a natural form of grace." The poems in *The Zigzag Walk* and *The Anonymous Lover* seek that kind of absolution.

Some of the poems in *The Zigzag Walk* find absolution in landscape, a visit to Point Lobos or walking to Partington Cove at Big Sur with his sons. Others from that book find absolution in mourning the death of Keats and of Cummings; they along with "Elegy for Dylan Thomas" published in *The Bridge of Change* are perhaps as fine a group of elegies as any contemporary poet has done. Logan is at his best when he is able to merge his private griefs into a larger, common grief:

you wanted to know that other world
while you were still alive.
All poets do. All men. All gods.
Inside a woman we search for the lost wealth
of our self. Marcel says.

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Some Information

Bob Kaufman's *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956-1978*, recently published by New Directions, is being translated into Dutch by Simon Vinkenoog, and will be published in the Netherlands with an introduction by Ira Cohen. Ron Silliman's 3-page magazine, *Totter's*, (c/o Central City Hospitality House, 146 Leavenworth, S.F., CA 94102) has once again surfaced. Inquiries of all sorts are encouraged, with future issues to appear "from time to time". This issue focuses on Steve Benson's work.

A new series of hardbound poetry is being edited by Robert Peters. Six books a year will be published by Scarecrow Press, with the intention of creating an overview of traditional and experimental contemporary poetry available to libraries, schools and general bookstores who could subscribe to the series. To be eligible, the poet must have published three or more books previously. To suggest your work or someone else's, write to Robert Peters at P.O. Box 656, Metuchen, NJ 08840.

A new poetry reading series will begin at the Noe Valley Ministry on Sunday evenings in October. Poets who perform with dancers, musicians or mimes are encouraged to contact Diane Frank, c/o Noe Valley Poetry, 1021 Sanchez St., San Francisco, CA 94114, to arrange a possible reading. Include poems, SASE, and your phone number. An anthology of poems read at the Sacred Grounds open mike from 1978 to now is being assembled for a fall '81 publication date. Send no more than five poems to David Frankel, 359 - 30th St., San Francisco, CA 94131, if you've been one of the readers.

AGADA, a new Jewish literary journal, is beginning triannual publication, and is seeking subscriptions (\$10 per year, sample issue \$4), and submissions. *Meiseh*, other fiction, poetry, Torah, translations, essays and graphics are welcome. Write AGADA, 2020 Essex St., Berkeley, CA 94703.

Corrections: The "Poets for Gay Freedom" review in the July *Flash* inadvertently described the Aaron Shurin, Diane Di Prima reading as the main Gay Freedom Week reading. Mainstream Exiles also sponsored four excellent readings in connection with Gay Freedom Week, which we in no way intended to slight. Also, *Oboe* magazine (Wilderness Press, 495 Ellis St., Suite 1156, San Francisco, CA 94102) has not folded as the *Flash* reported. In fact, grants, and "an unusual infusion of subscriptions" has, by popular demand, forced the publication of *Oboe* #5, due late this year.

Finally, for you summer travelers; a destination. Bisbee, Arizona, just south of Tucson, is having a poetry festival August 21-23. Their 3rd annual, it will be held despite funding problems. Cochise Fine Arts, a local non-profit, has funded it in the past, but pulled out this year, leaving the festival organizers to make do with personal loans, small grants from the NEA, Arizona Arts Council, and local newspapers. Six poets are scheduled to read, perform and hold workshops at the Bisbee Poetry Festival: Helen Adam, Amiri Baraka, Ted Berrigan, William Everson, Jackson MacLow, and Alice Notley. The BPF press release reads like a cultural document: "As usual, the old-guard

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(Poem, *Slow to Come on the Death of E.E. Cummings*, 1894-1962)

These foolish ducks lack a sense of guilt and so their multi-thousand-mile range is too short for the hope of change.

At Pihana you stand
 where Kamehemeha shed
the blood of young Hawaiian men
in thankful sac-
 rifice
some few of his bat-
 tles won. (He was
turned on to blood
 by Captain Cook—
who was torn apart—
and he showed
 a tenacity like
that of the later ministers
 of Christ.)
The stones of the heiau
 now
are the horrid black
 of that
old
dried blood.

(Poem for My Friend Peter at Pihana)

(Poem for My Friend Peter at Pihana)

*We grin and he winds up the roll
Then Stephen frowns and mutters, "Shit.
Something wrong with it!" And we find
the damn thing didn't work quite right.
None of the photos will come out.
We pause for half a minute and
then we laugh; all that instruction
posing at elaborate ease,
and "cheese." We turn toward the car,
our thoughts a bit reflective, far.
(A Day in the Sun)*

It has been waxing, burgeoning, for a long time.
It weighs me down like the chains of the man of Lahore
who began collecting links on his naked body
until he crawled around the town carrying the last
thirteen years of his life six-hundred-seventy pounds.
Each link or each lump in me is an offense against love.

(Believe It)

— Alan Soldofsky

The wan, enormous head bowed beside the hollow tree
I cannot describe the bird that hovered by that head
What was that luminescence sprung suddenly from earth
that seemed to arc between the bird's beak and the tree's root?
It echoed (or was echoed by) the eyes in the head,
which led my self into them before they slowly closed

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— John Bryan